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SUBJECT: FRANCE GROWS CLOSER TO RUSSIA: OPPORTUNITIES FOR
DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE WITH U.S. INTERESTS

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[1](#)B. PARIS 01544

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission, Mark Pekala, Reasons 1.4(b),(d)
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[1](#)1. (C//NF) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Franco-Russian relations are growing closer and more stable, driven by France's increasingly pragmatic approach toward Moscow and desire to take the lead in shaping European relations with Russia. Bilateral exchanges have grown more intense, "dense," and frequent, with an evolution toward business ties as the motivating factor, say French diplomats. President Sarkozy's push to improve relations with Russia has quickened the tempo of engagement, and Moscow appears eager to strengthen the partnership. Moscow initially viewed Sarkozy with some skepticism, but now sees him as "someone who understands realpolitik," according to longtime Russian Political Counselor in Paris, Artem Studennikov. France's deepening dialogue with Russia and growing pragmatism bring policy choices -- on issues such as arms sales, Georgia, and a new European security architecture. They present the possibility of increased divergence with the United States but also the potential for Washington and Paris to consult more closely and act in tandem to incentivize better Russian actions. The French press has chided President Sarkozy as evolving from "Sarkozy, the American" to "Sarkozy, the Russian;" our view is that Sarkozy is primarily an energetic pragmatist seeking to put Paris on the first rung of world leaders. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

FRENCH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: FULL-STEAM AHEAD

[1](#)2. (C//NF) In a series of meetings in November, French government officials, policy analysts, and Russian, Georgian, and Polish diplomats responded with a unanimous bottom line to poloffs' questions regarding how French policy toward Russia has changed under Sarkozy and where it is headed: Franco-Russian relations have grown closer under Sarkozy, and an increasingly pragmatic approach by Paris, often driven by economic goals, will continue to strengthen ties. Since Sarkozy took office, Franco-Russian bilateral exchanges have grown more intense, "dense," and frequent, according to MFA Russia DAS Florence Ferrari. Ferrari told poloffs on November 10 that the French approach under Sarkozy has changed because Sarkozy himself is eager to show progress in the relationship. He also "reacts strongly to crises," Ferrari noted, adding that Sarkozy believes crises require action, whereas his predecessor (Chirac) took a more cautious approach. This activist approach led Sarkozy to take a leadership role in the war in Georgia, Ferrari argued. Ferrari, along with MFA Russia Desk officers Arnaud Migoux and Madeleine Courant, pointed out that the upcoming Year of France in Russia and Year of Russia in France "is a sign that France and Russia are growing closer strategically."

[1](#)3. (C//NF) Isabelle Facon of the Paris-based Foundation for

Strategic Research told poloffs on November 9 that the French have not adopted a "grand strategy" toward Russia. Instead, their approach to Russia has become "increasingly pragmatic" and is comprised of "small pieces." French-Russian relations are now more "fluid," and "economic interests have more importance" than they did under Chirac, she argued. Moreover, she continued, Sarkozy believes that "an angry Russia is not good for European security," hence Sarkozy's commitment to engagement of Moscow.

14. (C//NF) Whatever Russia does, however, Paris will continue to regard Moscow with some distrust, Facon noted -- a sentiment that was echoed by French government officials. Facon also noted, however, that Russia remains suspicious of France's closeness, under Sarkozy, to the United States. France appears less "independent" (in other words, less anti-American) under Sarkozy, Facon said. "Now that the French have reintegrated into NATO and they have a sort of rapprochement with Washington, they appear less predictable to the Russians," she remarked. In response to an inquiry by poloffs, Facon admitted that public skepticism in France about Russia will not necessarily constrain French foreign policy. The French popular press is fairly unified in its critical coverage of Russia; Chechnya, she said, played a large role in establishing this trend, and the war in Georgia also sparked a negative reaction in France.

15. (C//NF) Polish Embassy First Secretary Krzysztof Rozek spoke on November 9 with poloffs about what he called the "privileged relations" that Russia enjoys with France, which he dated to 2003, in the run-up to the war in Iraq. He emphasized, however, that French-Russian ties under Sarkozy

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have grown deeper, more stable, and more wide-ranging. Rozek described foreign policy under Sarkozy as a "little revolution," with significant changes in the French approach toward Russia. The Poles view French policy toward Moscow as motivated increasingly by economic profit -- in particular, opening new markets -- and by France's desire to play the role of a great power. The French appear increasingly unwilling to criticize Moscow as readily as they criticize Washington, he added.

16. (C//NF) Drawing on his eight-and-a-half years of service in the Russian Embassy in Paris -- under Russian Presidents Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev -- Political Counselor Artem Studennikov told poloffs on November 12 that he has witnessed a "constant progression" in Franco-Russian ties. According to Studennikov, Franco-Russian rapprochement began, slowly, in November 2000, during former President Putin's first trip to France. (Relations had cooled considerably in 1999 and into 2000, following Russia's actions in Chechnya, he noted.)

In 2001 France and Russia launched their first annual bilateral "seminar" on joint economic projects, and in 2002 they began a 2-plus-2 strategic dialogue. (Russia is one of only two countries -- the United States is the other -- with which France has established such dialogue.) Studennikov noted that relations advanced rapidly in 2003, as Russia and France joined forces to oppose the war in Iraq. Before Sarkozy took office, the Russians viewed him skeptically, Studennikov remarked. They considered him a "big" supporter of the Atlantic alliance, and took note of his criticisms of Russia during his presidential campaign. After he took office, the Russians learned that Sarkozy is a "very pragmatic" leader who "accepts the idea of realpolitik." He has not developed the personal "closeness" with Russia that Chirac had, but "there are no difficult issues between Russia and the France of Sarkozy," Studennikov said. A difference of opinion over Georgia, he said, "doesn't complicate things too much."

FRENCH CALL MISTRAL SALE A "SMART" MOVE FOR BOTH SIDES

17. (C//NF) The possible sale of French Mistral-class

helicopter carrier ships to Russia is an example of French pragmatism and signals "normalization" of trade, particularly arms sales, with Russia, according to French policy analyst Facon. A Mistral that docked in St. Petersburg on Monday, November 23, was featured in an International Herald Tribune (November 24) photo with a caption noting that France hopes to sell up to three Mistral vessels to Russia. French government officials agreed that such a sale should be seen in an economic context and not as supplying implements of war. Georgian Embassy Political Counselor Gocha Javakhishvili and Polish diplomat Rozek disagreed with this assessment, emphasizing that the ships could be used against Russia's neighbors. French MFA Assistant Secretary-equivalent for Continental Europe Roland Galharague pointed out to poloffs on November 10 that the French view a Mistral sale as a smart decision by both sides -- one that will provide employment for French workers and help Moscow to streamline and modernize its military. See Reftel A (Paris 01529) for more information on the Mistral sale.

"CHANGING THE CONVERSATION" ON EUROPEAN SECURITY

18. (C//NF) French leaders perceive dialogue with Russia on European security as a means to "reassure Moscow" and prevent it from isolating itself, according to Galharague and Ferrari. "Russia becomes more aggressive when it is isolated," according to Facon. The desire to reassure Russia, however, has limits and will not automatically translate into support for a new security treaty and institutions, according to MFA officials. Galharague spoke broadly about Russia's view that a new European security architecture "is needed," but he noted that such a proposal remains "vague." Ferrari described it as "more a posture than a proposal." The French have not yet seen a draft, Galharague noted, and are waiting for Russia to provide concrete details as proof of their seriousness. According to Galharague, "you cannot sell the house in advance." The French expect the issue to be raised at the OSCE ministerial meeting in early December, according to Ferrari.

19. (C//NF) Galharague remarked, however, that just as Washington has "reset relations" with Russia, "In Europe, we, too, have changed the conversation." He noted that a summit in Europe that engages Russia to discuss security issues is preferable to refusing dialogue and "giving Moscow a pretext to go out on its own." According to Galharague, it would be better to "pull the rug out from under the Russians" in the

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context of discussion than "have the rug pulled out from under the Europeans by Russia." Galharague suggested that talks on a Russian proposal could be held under the title of an "informal summit" or "political meeting" with heads of state attending and preparations beginning several months in advance.

110. (C//NF) Studennikov said the Russians "do not seek a new security treaty;" they want to change Europe's security "architecture." The Cold War system is still in place right now, he noted. Moscow does not seek to "liquidate" NATO, which would be "naive and unrealistic." Instead, Russia seeks to modernize the system so that it represents "the reality of our time," he stated. As the Russians have broached this subject with NATO members, they have found "hesitations among some" and "interest among others," Studennikov explained. The French fall into the latter category, he said. The Russian proposal moves beyond the Corfu process in that it seeks to involve all five major European institutions that touch on security issues involved in the dialogue, which Studennikov listed as: NATO, the OSCE, the EU, the Community of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. French officials appear amenable to this approach, Studennikov said. The French, however, want to broaden the discussion to include economic and humanitarian issues, whereas the Russians want

to focus exclusively on hard security issues. The Russians are currently drafting a proposal in Moscow, Studennikov said, which should be ready "in the next few months." When asked whether the Russians would show it to the French first, since they have proved receptive, Studennikov replied that he believed that the USG, not the French, would see it first. For additional reporting on France's position on strategic issues, notably Missile Defense, see Reftel B (Paris 01544).

A SHARED APPROACH TO IRAN

¶11. (C//NF) There is a growing "convergence" between Russia and France on Iran, according to Ferrari and her team. MFA Desk Officer Courant said the French believe the Russians are "more on our side now than in a 'Russia-China' camp, even if their pronouncements are contradictory at times." Ferrari and Courant noted that the Russians appear to be trying to influence the Iranians more often now, to convince them to change their behavior. French MFA officials noted that Paris is counting on the Russians to use their influence with the Iranians to achieve Tehran's compliance with the IAEA's October proposal that responded to Iran's request for fuel for its research reactor. Studennikov offered that the Russians are actively engaging the Iranians and doing "everything they can" to "press" Tehran. Studennikov pointed out, however, that there are "profound" differences among the Iranians themselves that will take time to resolve. The Russians perceive the French as ahead of the Americans with a "tough line" approach to Iran, according to Studennikov. In response to poloffs' question about the status of a proposed Russian delivery of an S-300 missile system to Iran, Studennikov noted that the Russians have put the delivery "on hold."

GEORGIA NOT AN IMPEDIMENT TO IMPROVING RELATIONS

¶12. (C//NF) France's role in mediating a solution to the conflict in Georgia "did not boost, but did not damage" Franco-Russian relations, according to Ferrari. The French, however, are "embarrassed" and "irritated" by Russian behavior in Georgia, according to Ferrari and Facon. After France mediated an end to the conflict, "everyone lauded the success of French diplomacy -- then the agreement was not implemented or respected," Facon remarked. She noted that Washington drew a "very clear red line," on Georgia, but now the French have a sense that Americans are disengaging on Georgia in favor of Afghanistan.

¶13. (C//NF) Georgian Political Counselor Javakhishvili told poloffs on November 9 that the Georgian Ambassador to France had officially and vehemently protested the possible Mistral sale to senior advisors to the French Foreign and Defense Ministers. "The Europeans are cynical in their approach, and they give the Russians reason to believe European anger will simply pass with time," Javakhishvili told poloffs on November 9. "The Europeans will disagree with the Russians on Georgia, and say a few words of indignation, but do nothing more," he asserted. The French want "normalization" with Russia, Javakhishvili said, "but at what price?" "Will they sacrifice Ukraine, Georgia, and Chechnya?" he asked. The government of Georgia has asked Sarkozy to raise Russia's non-compliance with the peace accord, according to

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Javakhishvili, but the French would not make any promises. "It's not a la mode right now," he commented wryly. The Georgians have warned the French that their failure to hold the Russians accountable will have consequences for the whole region. "It is a precedent," Javakhishvili said.

EU MEMBERS ON RUSSIA: A "CONVERGENCE" OF VIEWS

¶14. (C//NF) Responding to poloff's question regarding

whether the European Union's perspective on Russia resembles that of France, Ferrari used the word "convergence" several times: "the way forward is to engage," she remarked. Support for engagement is now "unanimous," she claimed, admitting that such unanimity developed only recently. Ferrari described an evolution in Europe, during which new member states have become less suspicious of Russia ("even the Balts and the Poles," she claimed). Despite this broad agreement in favor of engagement over confrontation, not everyone in Europe "is on the same page about Russia," Ferrari confessed, but she argued they all now "share the same objective" -- to create a constructive EU-Russia partnership.

¶15. (C//NF) With that aim in mind, the French have been pressing for the renewal of the EU-Russia Partnership Accord, which was in force between 1997 and 2007, according to Ferrari. France is leading the negotiations, Ferrari said, to replace the Accord with a more vigorous agreement. The new agreement will take into account changes in Europe since 1997. "The European Union can do more with Russia now," she stressed, since the EU itself has expanded and recently consolidated its authority. The Accord's "four spaces of cooperation" will include a section on Human Rights and Democracy, Ferrari noted. There will be "less on this front" (Human Rights), she admitted, than in new areas of cooperation, including Justice, Home Affairs, and Commerce.

PUTIN VISIT ON NOVEMBER 26-27 TO EMPHASIZE ECONOMIC TIES

¶16. (C//NF) Galharague described Russian Prime Minister Putin's visit to Paris November 26-27 as completely focused on bilateral relations, with emphasis on three areas of cooperation: 1) launching the reciprocal Year of Russia in France and Year of France in Russia; 2) making progress on a "small package" of agreements, including the rights of French expatriates in Russia; and 3) French-Russian trade projects, which he emphasized as the main focus of the visit. According to Galharague, the visit as a whole will focus on "contracts, not politics." A plenary session and bilateral meetings with Fillon will take place, but Galharague noted that Putin is Russia's "authorized salesman," while Medvedev handles the broader political portfolio. The GOF likely will not raise Russia's non-compliance with the French-brokered peace agreement in Georgia. "We're addressing that issue at different levels," Ferrari noted in response to a question from poloffs. (Javakhishvili said the Georgians asked French Prime Minister Fillon to raise the issue of non-compliance with the peace agreement when he met with Prime Minister Putin in Yaroslavl on September 14. Fillon agreed to do so, according to the Georgian, but then decided against it, explaining it would not be appropriate.)

¶17. (C//NF) Studennikov described French-Russian economic relations as robust and noted a list of business projects under discussion during Putin's visit. Although Studennikov judged that Russia maintains stronger overall economic ties with Germany, and even with the United States, its ties with France have been growing "deeper and more extensive" in recent years. Franco-Russian commercial ties have grown rapidly, he said. France and Russia have a joint satellite project and other aerospace collaboration, including Airbus involvement in the manufacturing of Russian planes for regional flights. (The "Jet Cent (100)" Russian planes took part in the Paris Air Show of 2009, according to Studennikov.) French and Russian companies have collaborated in the field of atomic energy. The French are involved in various ways with both Nord Stream and South Stream. The French construction firm Vinci has almost completed a contract to construct a major highway between St. Petersburg and Moscow. Renault has a factory near Moscow, and Peugeot has plans to build one nearby. The French bank, Societe Generale, has invested heavily in Russia, being one of the first foreign banks to obtain a general license, and expanding its presence by acquiring shares of Russian banks. Studennikov also noted that increasing collaboration on visa and other consular issues is improving movement in both directions for French and Russian businessmen.

118. (C//NF) Comment: During his electoral campaign, the

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French press chided President Sarkozy as "Sarkozy, the American", a label the newly elected President embraced. Later, based on his easing critiques of Russian human rights practices, the French press dubbed him "Sarkozy, the Russian." Both of these miss the point. In our view, Sarkozy is instead an energetic pragmatist who seeks first and foremost to advocate French national interests and put Paris on the first rung of world leaders. While Paris' deepening relationship with Moscow could lead to U.S.-French policy divergences, it also provides a potential opportunity to influence Russian behavior through collaboration with a like-minded partner. Increased engagement with France on Russia can enhance our direct diplomacy with Moscow; some messages will be more palatable to the Russians if they come from Paris. Still, the French constantly note to us that "we are neighbors of Russia; we live in the same space." The French use this basic fact (along with their "pragmatic" economic goals) as a reason to "avoid provoking Russia" at all costs and on almost all issues. As a result, when we need to engage on important Russia-related matters with Paris, the French will be more willing to listen to us if they understand that our approach to Russia is also collaborative, cooperative, and constructive wherever possible -- and that well-founded criticism and robust defense of democratic principles are not provocations.

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